

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Buying frenzy

He may have deep pockets and very short arms, but even David Robinson can't resist shelling out for a well-specced new notebook for under £500

Never again. I say it every time. It's an idle threat, of course, as it can't be deferred, put off, delayed or procrastinated about indefinitely. Ultimately, the time comes when you can no longer avoid buying a new PC.

As I'm in a state of perpetual motion, I'm a dedicated portable computer user, and have been for over 20 years. My first one weighed almost two stone; it's a museum piece, but it still works. The last one, a Sony Vaio, gave me good service for almost four years, which is close to a record for me. The only hardware upgrades it had were some more memory to bring it up to 1GB and an external hard disk that I successfully used to get round the problem of running out of disk space. However, by today's standards, 40GB just isn't enough.

It was also starting to feel slow. As well as all the applications I need (language compilers, Office, Visio for flowcharts, DTP stuff and so on), I have to try lots of programs, even if I don't want to keep them. Even when you remove them with the official uninstaller, they frequently seem to leave a legacy of dross cluttering up the Program Files folder and the Registry, and after a while your PC behaves like an elite runner toggled up in diving boots. You can try deleting stuff manually but you always feel nervous that you're going to wind up with something vital not working.

TURBO CHARGED

Three things finally drove the decision to change. First, I've been using the latest edition of Turbo Delphi for most of my programming. Its layout is a little less cluttered than MS Visual Studio's, but there's still a lot to get onscreen, and 1,024x768 pixels simply ain't enough. And despite using the external hard disk, the 20GB C: drive partition was constantly running out of space, with program files and the Windows folder taking up a huge bulk of it.

The final straw came while I was evaluating a new accounting system called Enterprise Suite



(www.enterprise.co.uk). This is based on a .NET architecture, which, like anything new from the slots in Seattle, is a real resources hog. It's a great program but needs modern hardware to run right. I'm beginning to appreciate why .NET has taken so long to achieve any widespread take-up.

The first problem to solve was what to replace the Vaio with. It's a buyer's market these days, and I've seen branded laptops on sale through trade distributors for as little as £279 plus VAT. When you're an Olympic-standard spendthrift like me, that sounds like a good deal. The old Televideo luggage (see www.draxson.co.uk for more details) cost nearly two grand in 1985 and didn't have a hard disk. I added one of those myself later, paying almost as much as a cheap laptop costs now – and that's without accounting for inflation. In real terms the Televideo would now hammer the wallet for close to seven thousand pounds.

But I'm confused by some of the specifications (perhaps it's my age). The old Vaio had a 2.8GHz Pentium processor. The cheapo new ones come with processors rated in the 1.2 to 1.6GHz range. Are they really only a third as quick? Dunno. Anyway, I want one with a dual-core processor, as the latest programming languages and the .NET stuff need a fair amount of welly. And I want a brand I recognise, not Wamdingdongpoo or

something similar. And I want a *big* hard disk, as lack of space was one of the main motivations for the change. And I want Windows XP Professional, not Vista. I've neither the time nor the inclination to find out where Microsoft has moved everything to, and I don't want to wait for Service Pack X to fix the inevitable 'features' that don't work as they should.

BARGAIN HUNT

Frankly, there's very little difference these days between the so-called trade prices and what you pay in the *Shopper* mail-order ads. Even so, I troll through the distributor sites looking for a bargain. Fujitsu-Siemens has some promising offerings, as does Toshiba. Sony is expensive by comparison, so replacing the Vaio with a sibling seems unlikely. Eventually I find what I'm looking for at Northamber: a 1.7GHz dual-core Toshiba with XP Professional, a two-layer DVD rewriter, built-in WiFi, 1GB of RAM and a 120GB hard disk for £413 plus the dreaded VAT, which I can claim back. Not bad, huh?

Except they haven't got any. It's a new model, the telesales rep explains, and they're waiting for the first stocks. OK, I'll wait.

After three weeks of waiting, I phone to ask when it's coming. "Ah," says the rep, "that model's been discontinued." I've heard of short product life-cycles, but three miserable weeks is pushing things a

bit. Some amoeba live longer than that. He says he can deliver a substitute tomorrow with 2GB of RAM (otherwise everything else sounds the same) for 'just' £100 more. By now I'm desperately short of hard disk space, so I acquiesce because I can't be arsed with the aggro of constantly moving data about any more.

KEYS WEST

They say tomorrow never comes, but the notebook arrived as promised. By and large, I like it. The widescreen display is great for programming, and I can have lots more windows open at once. The keyboard is a bit 'clacky' and definitely not as nice as the old Vaio's, but then a Sony with an equivalent spec costs at least half as much again as I paid.

One slightly awkward thing is the multimedia control panel to the left of the keyboard. It's a nice feature because you can use it to control presentations without using a mouse or having control buttons visible on the screen. However, the downside, at least for me, is that it makes the keyboard seem odd. I'm used to the Shift and Caps Lock keys being on the left-hand side of the keyboard panel, but now that they're not I have to adjust for the new position while typing. I have the same trouble when playing my portable but headless Steinberger electric guitar; the playing area is the same length as normal but it looks shorter so I subconsciously make unnecessary adjustments, which leads to mistakes.

The Toshiba system is also quick. Two times 1.7GHz is definitely much quicker than the old 2.8GHz Pentium processor. But is it fast enough to run Superbike Challenge? I give it a go and – would you believe it? – it runs perfectly.

So, it's time for the first simulated race. I get to the first corner in a blaze of noise and exhaust fumes – and fall off. **CS**

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